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ABSTRACT

Based on the results of a study on the process of change in urban education, this scholarly paper discusses the design of the study and sets forth common characteristics or "essential conditions" of innovative school districts. These are: a citzenry that encourages and supports change, an assertive school that translates the community's mandate for change into district policy, a strong superintendent whose leadership skills are known and respected by the school district and community, a well-defined and developed change delivery system, and a teaching staff that is not opposed to the district's innovative efforts. The paper elaborates the essential conditions which were expected to emerge, those which did emerge, and the extent to which these conditions were actually present.
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COMMON CHARACTERISTICS OF INNOVATIVE URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICTS: A TALE OF THREE CITIES

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When I was first approached about presenting an AERA paper on "The Management of Change in Urban Education" the task of writing such a paper seemed reasonable and do-able. At that time, I had just finished working as a consultant at the RAND Corporation on a research study on the process of change in urban education. I was also serving as the Director of the IMTEC U.S. Bicentennial Seminar on the "Management of Change in Urban Education." On the basis of the knowledge I anticipated I would gain from these two activities, it almost seemed as though the paper would write itself.

However, as I sat down to compose my thoughts for this paper the cold reality hit me, and I began to see the folly of such an undertaking. First, I realized how presumptuous it is for anyone to say he or she knows very much about so vast and complex topic. Second, it was absurd to think that this topic could be dealt with in any comprehensive way in 15 minutes. And, third, it was more than a little ironic to give such a talk in New York City, which, as you know, has experienced no small amount of difficulties with its schools over the years.

Accordingly, I have taken the liberty to alter the title and scope of my paper somewhat in order to present something that is more defensible

under the circumstances. Thus, the title of my paper has been changed from "The Management of Change in Urban Education" to "Common Characteristics of Innovative Urban School Districts: A Tale of Three Cities."

Anyone remotely familiar with urban education in America knows that our urban school districts are struggling desperately to meet the serious challenges that face them. The litany of their troubles is quite familiar, e.g., declining enrollments and revenues, decaying physical plants, legal, fiscal, political, and bureaucratic constraints, and shifting populations. Similarly, the results of these conditions, e.g., declining test scores, student vandalism and violence, deteriorating morale on the part of just about everybody, are also familiar. The problem for many urban districts is how to keep the ship afloat--not how to navigate new waters.

But one should be careful not to overstate the case. Not all urban districts are merely struggling to maintain the status quo; some faced with difficult situations have embarked upon significant change programs, and others are contemplating such a move. These change efforts by selected urban districts prompt certain questions: How does one go about managing change in urban school districts? What can we learn from the experiences of districts that have attempted large-scale changes? Do these districts share any common characteristics?

A look at the literature on educational change reveals little relevant research for urban reformers. The "change literature" contains numerous studies and some of them are quite good, but these studies are limited to relatively small organizations, such as school sites, or specific innovations, such as federally funded projects or the implementation of specific curricular or instructional innovations.[1] It is difficult

to make inferences from these studies that will be very helpful to someone who is contemplating a comprehensive reform effort in an urban school district.

There have been, of course, intensive studies of urban school districts,[2] and of reform efforts in some urban districts,[3] but these are usually limited to an individual school district. As such, these studies offer little opportunity to draw general conclusions about the change process in urban education because there are no comparative data and, typically, no common research design has been utilized. The fact is we have not focused our attention on the management of change in urban school districts in any systematic way.

It was in recognition of this gap in the change literature in urban school districts that NIE funded a research study by the RAND Corporation of the management of change in urban education. I was a consultant on that study, and my paper today represents some initial thoughts about the change process in urban education and is based on data collected in the RAND study. Let me emphasize that my paper represents my own interpretation. The final report from that study which is in preparation is very comprehensive and lengthy. My remarks should not be considered a summary of the final report nor as a preview of what will appear in it.

Let me review very briefly the design of the study. After some careful preliminary inquiries, and in consideration of budgetary limitations, five urban school districts that were identified by selected observers as "innovative" were selected to be studied. These five districts ranged from 200,000 to 900,000 in population and were located in three different geographical sections of the United States. As you can easily see, we were not studying the process of change in the very

largest school districts in America, and this fact should be kept in mind as you evaluate the comments that follow. Two researchers spent three weeks in each school district gathering data around a preliminary case study outline that had been devised. This outline was based on some initial theoretical notions we had about what we might expect to find. The researchers gathered basic supporting documents and interviewed a wide range of individuals who were involved in the district's activities, including school administrators and teachers, school board members (past and present), business and civic leaders, local and state politicians, and representatives from the various community groups and the media. An enormous amount of data was collected.

The data from each district were analyzed and summarized into a comprehensive case study. Comparisons were made among the five districts, and generalizations were made about the change process in urban education as it was represented in these five districts.

As one can imagine, the synthesizing of these data yielded many different interpretations. What I want to discuss with you today is what happened to some initial notions I had about the characteristics one would find in innovative urban districts. The constraints of time limit the degree to which I can present a detailed discussion of the research. In several instances I have merely selected one component from many; what I am presenting is but a very small piece of a large puzzle.

As you will note from the title of my paper, my presentation is based on the experiences of three districts, not the five from which we collected data. The reason for this reduction in the number of districts is that after careful analysis, I decided that one district had more of

the appearance than the reality of change. Another district was undergoing change, but the process was the result of the clashing of ideologies in the public sector and the district was in a state of siege. The changes that were taking place more resembled the effects of deterioration than of a positive, planned reform effort. These two districts are not included in this paper. A condition of our conducting research in these districts was that the districts' identities were to remain anonymous; I am obliged to honor that commitment.

In the absence of any established theory about the process of change in urban education, I followed what I thought were reasonable expectations of what would explain the ability of these districts to be innovative. It goes something like this. There are a number of conditions or characteristics that must be present before change can occur. For purposes of this paper I will call these "essential conditions". Some of the more common ones are: good leadership, a change management plan, technical knowledge, a felt need to change, and a willingness to change on the part of a significant percentage of those who are to be affected by the change or innovation. In relatively small organizations, such as an elementary school, some of these conditions or elements could be absent initially because the presence of other conditions or elements could compensate for or effect the eventual emergence of other elements. For example, a dynamic principal with a small core of innovative teachers who are knowledgeable about the innovation they wish to implement in an elementary school might be able to surmount parent or teacher apathy toward or resistance to a particular innovation in the school. But, I reasoned, in large organizations, such as urban school districts, the ability to compensate for missing "essential conditions" is severely

lessened because of the sheer size and complexity of the enterprise. Fundamental innovations could not be initiated or sustained unless these "essential conditions" were present. We are all familiar with cases of an energetic and able superintendent and staff who have made no headway against an apathetic public, or a reform school board that has failed miserably when trying to ignite a fire under a self-satisfied and unimaginative school bureaucracy. I speculated, therefore, that a major reason why few urban school districts seem able to make much reform headway is that they lack one or more of these "essential conditions" and a program of significant innovation is thereby thwarted.

Following that line of reasoning, I expected that one would find present in these innovative districts the following five characteristics:

1. A citizenry that has identified the need for change in the school district and has the political and financial clout to insure that its concerns will be reflected in the school district's policy and practices.
2. A strong, assertive school board that has translated the community's mandate for change into school policy and practice.
3. A strong school superintendent whose leadership skills and commitment to innovation are known and respected in the school district and community.
4. A well-defined and developed management or delivery system that allows the school board and staff to assess needs, develop appropriate innovations, design suitable change strategies, and implement and evaluate innovations.
5. A teaching staff that is not opposed to the district's innovative efforts.

Let me briefly describe the extent to which these "essential elements" are found in these three innovative urban school districts.

1. A citizenry that encouraged and strongly supported change.

This "essential condition" was present and definitely a factor in only one of the three districts; in another district, coalitions of influentials were supportive of some innovations but essentially neutral on others; in the remaining district, this element did not figure significantly in the district's innovative thrust except for a relatively short period of time several years ago. Thus, in only one district was a supportive, change-oriented citizenry a sustaining influence on the district's innovative efforts.

2. A strong, assertive school board that translated the community's mandate for change into district policy.

This was a sustaining critical factor in the innovative effort of only one district. It was not essential in the other two. In one district there had been a remarkable turnover in board membership during a eight-year period of time, and the board's influence had thereby been minimized. In the other, the board was competent--but not a forceful agent of change.

3. A strong superintendent whose leadership skills are known and respected by the school district and community.

This was a central factor in the innovative efforts of two districts. The superintendents in these two districts were powerful, charismatic leaders--but very different in style. In the third district there had been several superintendents during the innovative period; some were stronger than others, but none of the several superintendents were identified as charismatic, powerful leaders. In the same third district

it was widely acknowledged that a deputy superintendent, who was constantly present during the innovation period, played a significant role in the school district's reform efforts. His leadership, however, was limited largely to the internal organization. He was not a recognized community leader.

4. A well-defined and developed change delivery system.

By definition, I guess, a successful innovative school district has an effective delivery system. But these delivery and management systems varied from district to district. Two of the districts pointed with pride toward a data-based research and evaluation model that made extensive use of comprehensive evaluations. One had built the innovation process into its management system. The third district, however, was much "softer" in its management style; an ethos and thrust toward sophisticated data-based decision making was clearly missing.

5. A teaching staff that is not opposed to the district's innovative efforts.

The research methodology we utilized made it difficult to determine the teaching staffs' opinions about the district's innovative efforts. As a very limited approach to this topic, let me translate this concept into the terms some school district administrators used. That is, some administrators were convinced that the presence of a strongly organized or unionized teaching staff is antithetical to innovation. The managers in two districts pointed to the absence of a strongly organized teaching staff as a major reason for the district's ability to be innovative. In the third district, however, the teachers were very unionized and powerful, and the district managers considered the teachers as having provided essential leadership to the district's innovative efforts.

In summary, what I had assumed to be "essential conditions" did not appear to be so essential after all or varied considerably in the form they took from district to district. Each of these districts was missing one or more of these conditions. Successful innovation in urban districts does not have to wait for the confluence of these essential conditions in order for a significant period of innovation to occur.

About the only condition that seemed to be consistent was the absence of a strong central administration. However, as was noted, this need not mean that the superintendent had to provide charismatic leadership. Essential leadership could be provided by someone at a lower level in the district bureaucracy.

While the presence of all of these elements in a positive sense was not found, it might be noted that these "essential conditions" were at worst neutralized. That is, they did not represent a force against innovation. For example, while some districts did not have school boards or a citizenry who actively promoted change and innovation, it may be significant that these elements did not actively oppose the district's innovations.

A refined statement of my "essential conditions" speculation would be that a configuration of some of these "essential conditions" must be present and none of the "essential conditions" can be less than neutral toward innovation. It is likely that if a group of powerful citizens, a school board, or a major teacher group actively opposes innovation in an urban district, it will be able to successfully stop change. This has occurred in some districts. However, the experience in the districts we studied was such that we were unable to test that notion.

These findings about the "essential conditions" of change that were not found in these three urban districts can at best begin to narrow the range of possibilities about what accounts for the successful management of change in urban education. However, this leaves largely unanswered the question, "What does account for the successful management of change in these urban districts?"

As I indicated in the beginning of this paper, this question does not lend itself to simple answers; any realistic answer to that question will be complex and lengthy. In full recognition of that fact, let me, in closing, discuss some few characteristics that all three of these districts had in common. I do not present these as any check list of things that urban school districts can do to insure change. These should be considered speculations intended to peak curiosity and, perhaps, provide some guidance for those of you who are interested in conducting research in the change process in urban education.

1. All of the districts brought outside talent into the district management team. In building the management team, the districts reached out to other school districts and, indeed, outside of the ranks of those who were formerly prepared in education to fill critical line and staff positions. Many of these "outsiders" had good contacts in Washington and in their respective state capitols. These well-connected outsiders pursued their contacts aggressively and productively. As a result, the districts were able to secure considerable external funding to support their innovative efforts and to shape state educational legislation to the districts' advantage.

2. The districts maintained a balanced "outsider/insider" mix. They did not bring in a predominately new management team that took over control of the district management machinery. Instead, the districts seemed to recognize and value the political and organizational knowledge and skills of talented insiders. These insiders were placed in critical management positions along with their "outsider" colleagues.
3. Each district maximized the opportunities that were presented by forces outside of their control. When court orders were imposed (such as desegregation), when social/legal changes came to them (such as affirmative action), or state legislation was passed (such as single member school board districting), the districts seized these as opportunities to further their change efforts. This was not always easy to do and the approaches taken varied considerably. What was common to the districts was the ability not only to absorb externally imposed regulations, but to turn them to their own advantage.
4. The managers and promoters of change (be they school administrators or school board or citizen groups) were sensitive to and skilled at manipulating the social, economic, and political forces at work in their community. There seemed to be a "fit" between what the community and school district were ready to accept and what was promoted as an innovation. The managers of change had a sense of history and of what was possible to accomplish. By not attempting changes that would be rejected, especially in the beginning of the innovative period, the

change managers were able to set a positive or at least a neutral climate within which they could pursue innovative activities.

Let me conclude by recognizing that my comments today are a rather modest attack on the question of how to manage change in urban districts. The state of the art of managing such changes and our knowledge of that process is still quite primitive. I believe it is premature for anyone to make claims that they understand the dynamics of that complex topic.

I hope that my comments will encourage some of you to begin or continue your studies of this immensely complex topic. Certainly, the changing and improvement of urban education should command the attention of us all.

RCW:5

FOOTNOTES

[1]See Mary M. Bentzen and Associates. Changing Schools: The Magic Feather Principle. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974. N. Gran, J. B. Giaquinta, and M. Bernstein. Implementing Organizational Innovations. New York: Basic Books, 1971. L. Smith and P. Keith. Anatomy of Educational Innovation: An Organizational Analysis of an Elementary School. New York: Wiley, 1971. RAND Corporation. Federal Programs Supporting Educational Change (Vols. 1-4). Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 1975-76.

[2]For example, R. William Odell. Educational Survey Report of the Philadelphia Board of Education, February 1965. A. Harry Passow. Toward Creating a Model Urban School System: A Study of the Washington, D.C. Public School System, 1966.

[3]Henry S. Resnik. Turning on the System, War in the Philadelphia Public Schools. New York: Pantheon, 1970. David Rogers. 110 Livingston Street. New York: Vantage Books, 1969.

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